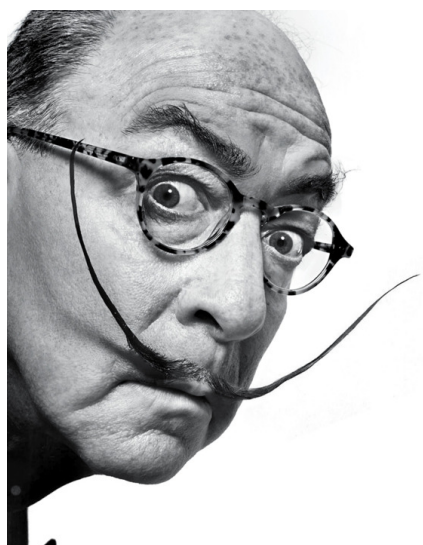


# How to Be an Artist 33 rules to take you from clueless amateur to generational talent (or at least help you live life a little more creatively)

By Jerry Saltz [@jerrysaltz](#)



Jerry Saltz, New York's art critic, as Salvador Dalí, based on a photograph by Philippe Halsman.

Photo: Photo by Marvin Orellana.  
Photo Illustration by Joe Darrow

**A**rt is for anyone. It's just not for everyone. I know this viscerally, as a would-be artist who burned out. I wrote about that last year, and ever since, I've been beset — every lecture I give, every gallery I pop my head into, somebody is asking me for advice.

What they're really asking is "How can I be an artist?"

When, last month, Banksy jerry-rigged a frame to shred a painting just when it was auctioned, I could almost hear the whispers: "Is that art?" This fall, the biggest museum event in New York is the Whitney's retrospective of Andy Warhol — the paradigmatic self-made, make-anything-art-and-yourself-famous artist. Today, we are all Andy's children, especially in the age of Instagram, which has trained everyone to think visually and to look at our regular lives as fodder for aesthetic output.

How do you get from there to making real art, great art? There's no special way; everyone has their own path. Yet, over the years, I've found myself giving the same bits of advice. Most of them were simply gleaned from looking at art, then looking some more. Others from listening to artists talk about their work and their struggles. (Everyone's a narcissist.) I've even stolen a couple from my wife.

There are 33 rules — and they really are all you need to know to make a life for yourself in art. Or 34, if you count "Always be nice, generous, and open with others and take good care of your teeth." And No. 35: "Fake it till you make it."

# ***Step One: You Are a Total Amateur***

*Five lessons before you even get started.*



Andy Warhol, based on *Self Portrait* (1986). Photo-Illustration: John Ritter for *New York Magazine*. Source photo: Marvin Orellana.

## ***Lesson 1: Don't Be Embarrassed***

I get it. Making art can be humiliating, terrifying, leave you feeling foul, exposed, like getting naked in front of someone else for the first time. **You often reveal things about yourself that others may find appalling, weird, boring, or stupid.** People may think you're abnormal or a hack. Fine. When I work, I feel sick to my stomach with thoughts like *None of this is any good. It makes no sense.*

**But art doesn't have to make sense. It doesn't even need to be good.** So don't worry about being smart and let go of being "good."

*Lesson 2: “Tell your own story and you will be interesting.” — Louise Bourgeois*



Louise Bourgeois in 1975. Photo: Mark? Setteducati, © The Easton Foundation/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS ), NY

Photo:Zohar

Amen, Louise. Don't be reined in by other people's definitions of skill or beauty or be boxed in by what is supposedly high or low. Don't stay in your own lane. Drawing within the lines is for babies; making things add up and be right is for accountants. Proficiency and dexterity are only as good as what you do with them. **But also remember that just because it's your story, that doesn't mean you're entitled to an audience.** You have to earn that. Don't try to do it with a big single project. Take baby steps. And be happy with baby steps.



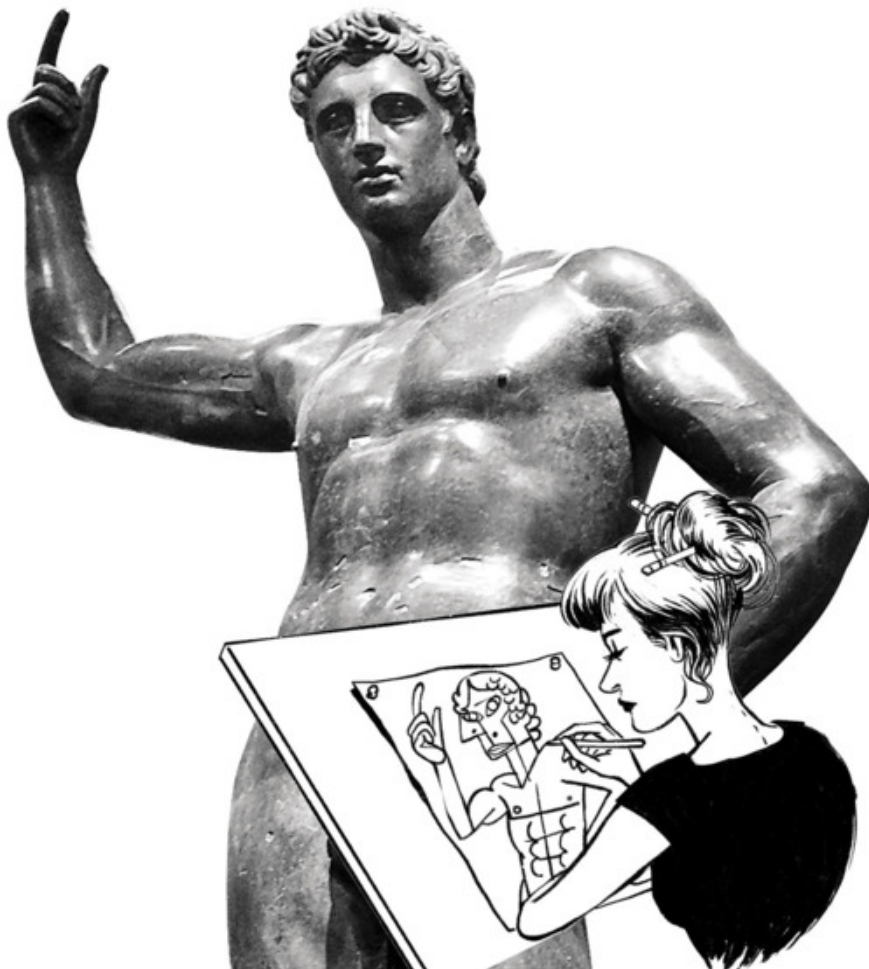
## Lesson 3: Feel Free to Imitate

We all start as copycats, people who make pastiches of other people's work. Fine! Do that. However, when you do this, focus, start to feel the sense of possibility in making all these things your own — even when the ideas, tools, and moves come from other artists.

Whenever you make anything, think of yourself as entering a gigantic stadium filled with ideas, avenues, ways, means, and materials. And possibilities. Make these things yours.

**This is your house now.**

Photo: Zohar?Lazar/Jason M. Kelly



## Lesson 4: Art Is Not About Understanding. Or Mastery.

*It is about doing and experience.*

No one asks what Mozart means. Or an Indian raga or the little tripping dance of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers to “Cheek to Cheek” in *Top Hat*.

**Forget about making things that are understood.** I don't know what Abba means, but I love it. Imagination is your creed; sentimentality and lack of feeling your foe. All art comes from love — love of doing something.



## Lesson 5: Work, Work, Work



Even in a psychiatric hospital, Yayoi Kusama is prolific. Photo: Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert/Getty Images

Sister Corita Kent said, “The only rule is work. If you work, it will lead to something. It’s the people who do all of the work all the time who eventually catch onto things.”

I have tried every way in the world to stop work-block or fear of working, of failure. There is only one method that works: work. And keep working.

**Every artist and writer I know claims to work in their sleep. I do all the time.**

Jasper Johns famously said, “One night I dreamed that I painted a large American flag, and the next morning I got up and I went out and bought the materials to begin it.”

How many times have you been given a whole career in your dreams and not heeded it?

It doesn’t matter how scared you are; everyone is scared. *Work.*

Work is the only thing that takes the curse of fear away.

## ***Step Two: How to Actually Begin***

*An instruction manual for the studio.*

Frida Kahlo, based on *Self Portrait, Dedicated to Dr. Eloesser* (1940). Photo: Marvin Orellana. Photo-illustration: Joe Darrow for *New York Magazine*.



### ***Lesson 6: Start With a Pencil***

Don't worry about drawing. Just make marks. Tell yourself you're simply diagramming, playing, experimenting, seeing what looks like what.

**If you can write, you already know how to draw;** you already have a form of your own, a style of making letters and numbers and special doodles.



These are forms of drawing, too. While you're making marks and drawing, pay attention to all the physical feedback you're getting from your hand, wrist, arm, ears, your sense of smell and touch. How long can your mark go before you seem to need to lift the pencil and make a different mark? Make those marks shorter or longer. Change the ways you make them at all, wrap your fingers in fabric to change your touch, try your other hand to see what it does. All these things are telling you something. Get very quiet inside yourself and pay attention to everything you're experiencing. **Don't think good or bad. Think useful, pleasurable, strange.** Hide secrets in your work. Dance with these experiences, collaborate with them. They're the leader; you follow. Soon you'll be making up steps too, doing visual calypsos all your own — ungainly, awkward, or not. Who cares? You'll be dancing to the music of art.

Carry a sketchbook with you at all times. Cover a one-by-one-foot piece of paper with marks. But don't just fill the whole page border to border, edge to edge. (Way too easy.) Think about what shapes, forms, structures, configurations, details, sweeps, buildups, dispersals, and compositions appeal to you.

Now do this on another surface, any surface, to know what kind of material appeals to you. Draw on rock, metal, foam-core, coffee cups, labels, the sidewalk, walls, plants, fabric, wood, whatever. Just make marks; decorate these surfaces. Don't worry about doing more. **All art is a form of decoration.** Now ask someone what ideas they get when they look at what you've made. They've just told you more about what you've already done. If the other person sees it in your work, it's there.

Next, draw the square foot in front of you. This can be tight, loose, abstract, realistic. It's a way to see how you see objects, textures, surfaces, shapes, light, dark, atmosphere, and patterns. It tells you what you missed seeing. **This will be your first masterpiece.** Now draw the same square foot from the other side. You are already becoming a much better seeing machine and you don't even know it.

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## *Lesson 7: Develop Forms of Practice*

For instance, on the subway, while waiting or sitting around, practice drawing your own hands. Lots of hands on the same page, hands over other hands. Other people's hands, if you want to. You can draw other parts of your body that you can see, too. But you have to look and then describe with your pencil or pen what you see. **Don't make it up!**

Mirrors are fine, even if you want to draw only where your cheek turns into your mouth. Play with different scales, make things bigger, smaller, twisted.



## Exercise: Forget Being a Genius and Develop Some Skills

I think all artists should:

- Build a clay pot.
- Sew pieces of fabric together.
- Prune a tree.
- Make a wooden bowl on a lathe, by carving.
- Make a lithograph, etching, or woodblock print.
- Make one hokey Dalí-like painting or mini Kusama light installation to get this out of your system.

You are now in possession of ancient secret knowledge.

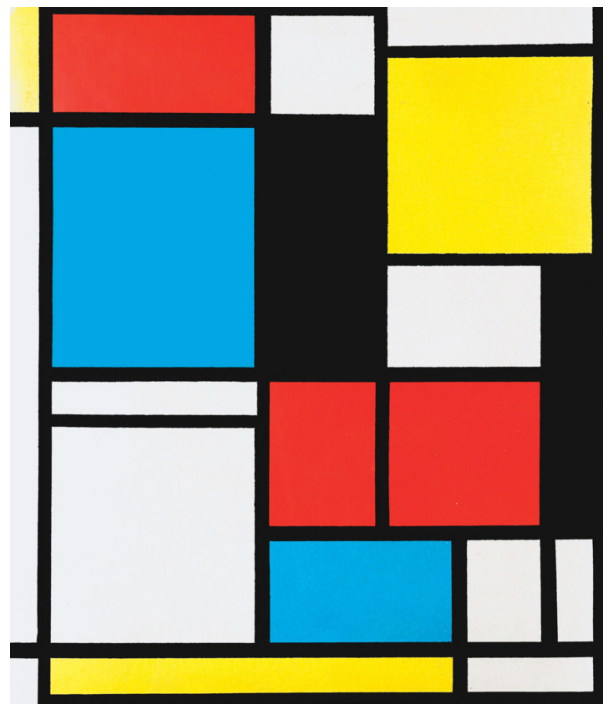
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## Lesson 8: Now, Redefine Skill

Artistic skill has nothing to do with technical proficiency, mimetic exactitude, or so-called good drawing. **For every great artist, there is a different definition of skill.**

Take drawing classes, if you wish; learn to draw “like the masters.” You still have to do it in an original way. Pollock could not draw realistically, but he made flicking paint at a canvas from above, for a time, the most prized skill in the art world.

You can do the same — **your skill will be whatever it is you’re doing differently.**



Piet Mondrian's derivative early drawing.  
And his totally-unskilled-but-insanely-skilled mature work.  
Photo: PHOTO 12/UIG via Getty Images

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## *Lesson 9: “Embed thought in material.” — Roberta Smith*

What does this mean? **An object should express ideas**; art should contain emotions. And these ideas and feelings should be easy to understand — complex or not.

These days, an artist might exhibit an all-brown painting with a long wall text informing us that the artist took the canvas to Kosovo near the site of a 1990s Serbian massacre and rubbed dirt on the canvas for two hours while blindfolded to commemorate the killing. Recently, while I was looking at boring black-and-white photographs of clouds in the sky, a gallerist sidled up to me and seriously opined, “These are pictures of clouds over Ferguson, Missouri, in protest of police violence.”

I started yelling, “No! These are just dumb pictures of clouds and have nothing to do with anything.”



Is Duchamp's  
*Fountain* an artwork  
or an idea? Both!

There is a different way. In the winter of 1917, Marcel Duchamp, age 29, bought a urinal at J.L. Mott Iron Works on Fifth Avenue, turned it on its side, signed it “R. Mutt 1917,” titled it *Fountain*, and submitted it to the non-juried Society of Independent Artists exhibition. *Fountain* is an aesthetic equivalent of the Word made flesh, an object that is also an idea — that anything can be an artwork.

Today it is called the most influential artwork of the 20th century.

This project of embedding thought in material to change our conception of the world isn't only a new development. When we see cave paintings, we are seeing one of the most advanced and complex visual operating systems ever devised by our species. The makers of the work wanted to portray in the real world something they had in their head and make that information readable to others. It has lasted tens of thousands of years. With that in mind ...



### Exercise: Build a Life Totem

Using any material on any surface, make or draw or render a four-foot-tall totem pole of your life. From this totem, we should be able to know something about you other than what you look like or how many siblings you have. Include anything you want: words, letters, maps, photos, objects, signs. This should take no longer than a week. After a week, it's finished. Period.

Now show it to someone who does not know you well. Tell them only, "This is a totem pole of my life till now." That's all. It doesn't matter if they like it.

Ask them to tell you what it means about your life. No clues. Listen to what they tell you.

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## Lesson 10: Find Your Own Voice

*Then exaggerate it.*



*Philip Guston was a generic AbEx guy. Then he became Philip Guston. Photo: © Estate of Philip Guston, Courtesy the estate and Hauser & Wirth. Photograph by Genevieve Hanson*



If someone says your work looks like someone else's and you should stop making it, I say **don't stop doing it**. Do it again. Do it 100 times or 1,000 times. Then ask an artist friend whom you trust if your work still looks too much like the other person's art. If it still looks too much like the other person's, try another path.

Imagine the horror Philip Guston must have felt when he followed his own voice and went from being a first-string Abstract Expressionist in the 1950s to painting clunky, cartoony figures smoking cigars, driving around in convertibles, and wearing KKK hoods! He was all but shunned for this. He followed his voice anyway. This work is now some of the most revered from the entire period. In your downtime ...

### **Exercise: An Archaeology**

Make an index, family tree, chart, or diagram of your interests. All of them, everything: visual, physical, spiritual, sexual. Leisure time, hobbies, foods, buildings, airports, everything. Every book, movie, website, etc. The totality of this self-exposure may be daunting, scary. But your voice is here.

This will become a resource and record to return to and add to for the rest of your life.

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## *Lesson 11: Listen to the Crazy Voices in Your Head*

I have my own sort of *School of Athens* in my head. A team of rivals, friends, famous people, influences dead and alive. They're all looking over my shoulder as I work; none of them are mean. All make observations, recommendations, etc. **I use music a lot.** I think, *Okay, let's begin this piece with a real pow! Like Beethoven.* Or the Barbara Kruger in my head says, *Make this sentence short, punchy, declarative, aggressive.* Led Zeppelin chimes in with, *Try a hairy experiment here; let it all show.* All the Sienese paintings I've ever seen beg me, *Make it beautiful.* D. H. Lawrence is pounding on the table, Alexander Pope is making me get a grip, Wallace Stevens listens to my language and recommends words, Whitman pushes me on, my inner Melville gets grandiose, and Proust drives me to make longer and longer sentences till they almost break, and my editor cuts these into eighths or edits them down to one.

(Writers need editors. No exceptions.)

**These voices will always be there for when things get tough.**

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## *Lesson 12: Know What You Hate*

*It is probably you.*

### **Exercise: Make a List of Art**

Make a list of three artists whose work you despise. Make a list of five things about each artist that you do not like; be as specific as possible. Often there's something about what these artists do that you share. Really think about this.

## Lesson 13: Scavenge

Claes Oldenburg with his *Floor Cone* in? 1963. Photo: Courtesy the Oldenburg van Bruggen Studio, © 1962 Claes Oldenburg



Life is your syllabus: Gather from everywhere.

Andy Warhol said, “I always like to work on ... things that were discarded, that everybody knew were no good.” He also understood that “department stores will become museums,” meaning that optical information can come from everywhere, even from a Celestial Seasonings package.

Originality did not conveniently die just in time for you and your generation to insist it no longer exists. **You just have to find it.** You can do this by looking for overlooked periods of art history, disliked and discredited styles, and forgotten ideas, images, and objects.

Then work them into your own art 100 times or 1,000 times.

## ***Step Three:* Learn How to Think Like an Artist**

*This is the fun part.*

### ***Lesson 14:* Compare Cats and Dogs**

Okay, this sounds ridiculous, but call your dog and it comes right over to you, placing its head in your lap, slobbering, wagging its tail: **a miraculous direct communication with another species.** Now call your cat. It might look up, twitch a bit, perhaps go over to the couch, rub against it, circle once, and lie down again. What am I saying? In seeing how the cat reacted, you are seeing something very close to how artists communicate.

The cat is not interested in direct communication. The cat places a third thing between you and it and relates to you through this third thing. Cats communicate abstractly, indirectly.

As Carol Bove says, “You don’t just walk up to beauty and kiss her on the mouth!”

**Artists are cats. (And they can’t be herded.)**

## Lesson 15: Understand That Art Is Not Just for Looking At

**Art does something.**

In the past 100 years or so, art has been reduced to being mainly something we look at in clean, white, well-lit art galleries and museums. Art has been limited this way, made a passive thing: another tourist attraction to see, take a picture in front of, and move on from. But for almost its entire history, art has been a verb, something that does things to or for you, that makes things happen. Holy relics in churches all over the world are said to heal.

Art has been carried into war; made to protect us, curse a neighbor, kill someone; been an aid in getting pregnant or preventing pregnancy. There are huge, beautiful, multicolored, intricately structured Navajo sand paintings used in ceremonies to ask the gods for assistance. The eyes painted on Egyptian sarcophagi are not there for us to see; they are there so the interred person can watch. The paintings inside the tombs were meant to be seen only by beings in the afterlife. Have you ever cried in front of a work of art? Write down six things about it that made you cry. Tack the list to your studio wall. Those are magical abracadabras for you.



Navajo sand paintings are also pleas to the gods. Photo: Geoffrey Clements/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images



## Lesson 16:

### Learn the Difference Between Subject Matter and Content

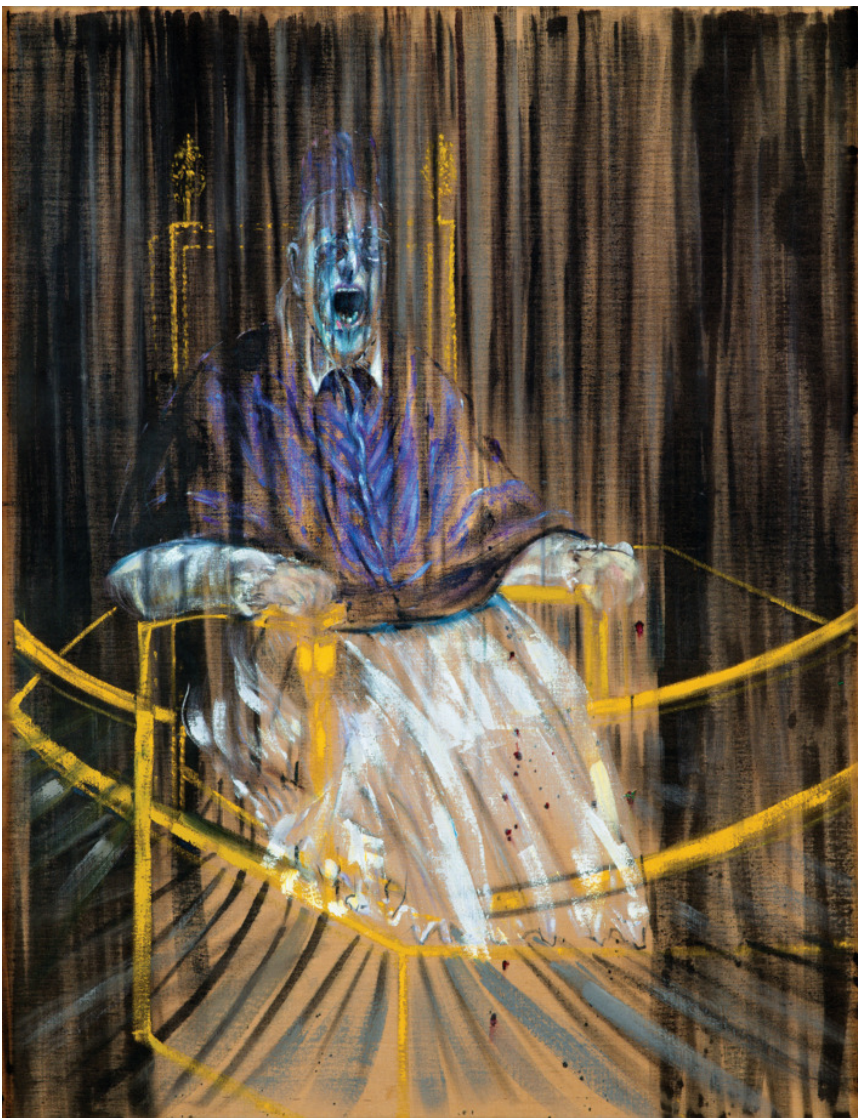
The subject matter of Francis Bacon's 1953 *Study After Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* is a pope, a seated male in a transparent sort of box. That's it. The content might be a rebellion or an indictment of religion. It might be claustrophobia or hysteria or the madness of religion or civilization.

The subject matter of Michelangelo's *David* is a standing man with a sling.

The content might be grace, beauty — he was just 17, if you know what I mean — pensiveness, physical awareness, timelessness, eternal things, a form of perfection, vulnerability.

This content is High Renaissance. Bernini's *David*, made 120 years later, is Baroque — all action and drama.

When you look at art, **make subject matter the first thing you see — and then stop seeing it.**



One of the most crucial lessons there is!

Is this painting about the pope or insanity? Photo: © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved, DACS/ARTIMAGE 2018



Try to find the *content* in a painting by Robert Ryman, who has been making almost-all-white work since the 1950s. Ask what Ryman's (or any artist's) ideas are and what his relationship to paint is, to surface, to internal scale (meaning what size brushstrokes were used in the work), to color. What is white to Ryman? Note the date: 1960. Why would he make this painting then? Would this have looked like other art at the time? How would it have been different? Ask yourself what else was being made then. How is the work hung on the wall? Is it in a frame? Is the stretcher or surface thick, thin, close to the wall? How is this like or unlike other almost- monochrome works by Ellsworth Kelly, Barnett Newman, Agnes Martin, or Ad Reinhardt? **Is the surface sensual or intellectual?**

Does the painter want you to see the work all at once or in parts? Are some parts more important than others? Is every part of the surface supposed to be equally important?

**What are the artist's ideas about craft and skill?** Do you think this artist likes painting or is trying to paint against it? Is this anti-art? What is Ryman's relationship to materials, tools, mark-making? How do you think he made the work? How might it be original or innovative? Why should this be in a museum? Why should it not be in a museum?

Would you want to live with it? Why or why not?

Why do you imagine the painting is this size?

Now try a Frida Kahlo.

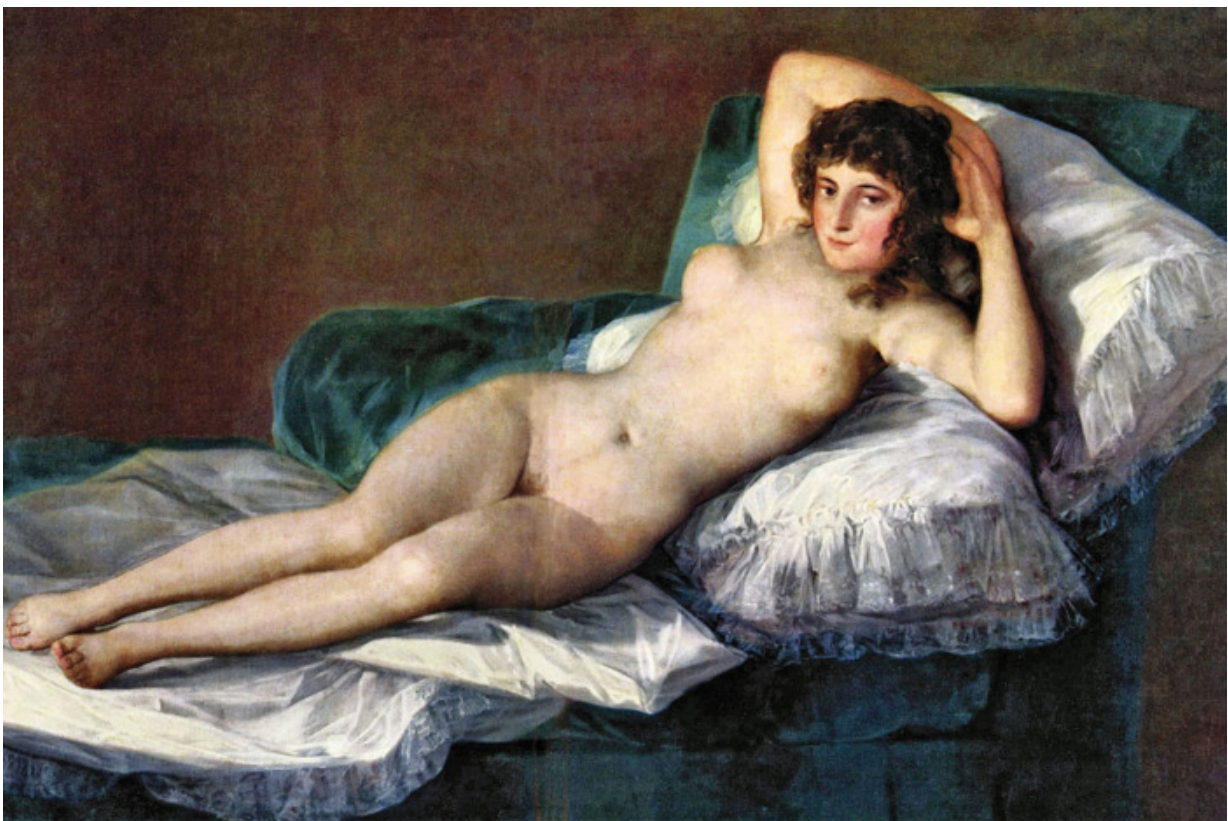


## Exercise: Compare These Eight Nudes

Forget the subject matter — what is each of these paintings actually saying?



Diego Velázquez, 1647. Photo: Art Media/Print Collector/Getty Images



by Francisco Goya, 1797–1800. Photo: Buyenlarge/Getty Images





Olympia, by Édouard Manet, 1863.

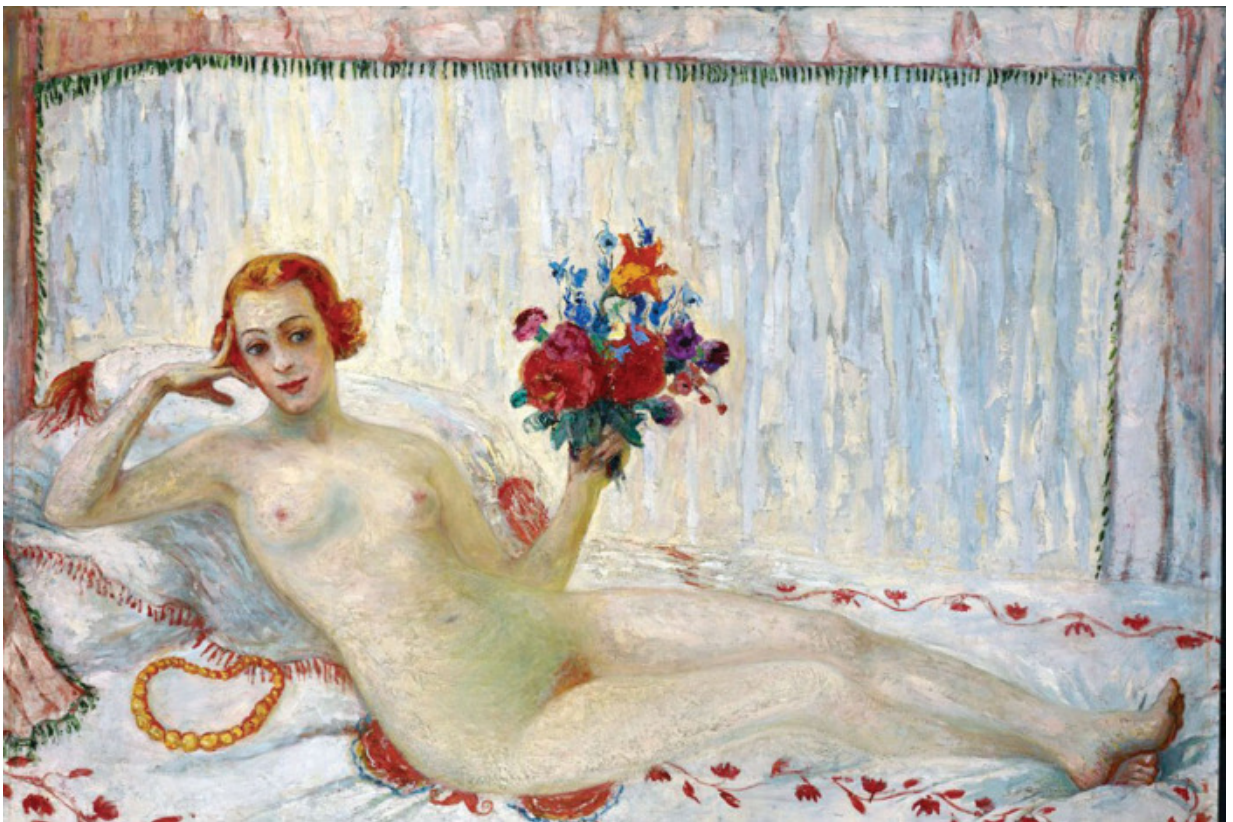


*Keeps Watch*, by Paul Gauguin, 1892.



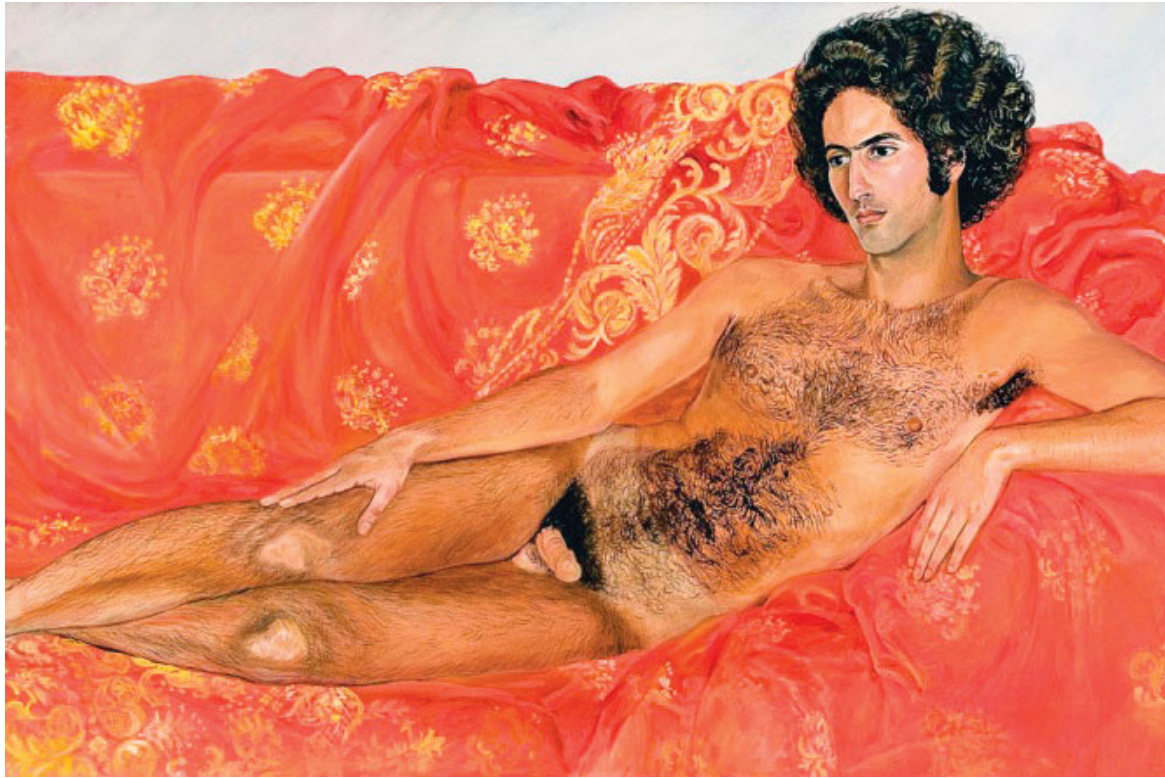


Blue Nude, by Henri Matisse, 1907



A Model (Nude Self-Portrait), by Florine Stettheimer, 1915





Imperial Nude: Paul Rosano, by Sylvia Sleigh, 1977. Photo: © Estate of Sylvia S. Alloway



Beachbody, by Joan Semmel, 1985. Photo: Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2018 Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



## *Lesson 17: See As Much As You Can*

Critics see by standing back, getting close, stepping up and back; looking at a whole show, comparing one work to another; considering the artist's past work, assessing developments, repetitions, regressions, failures, lack of originality; etc.

Artists see very differently: They get very close to a work; they inspect every detail, its textures, materials, makeup; they touch it, look at the edges and around the back of the object.

What are the artists doing? They will say, "Seeing how it is made." I would say, "**Stealing.**" You can steal from anything. You should! You better! Bad art teaches you as much as good art. Maybe more!

**Great art is often the enemy of the good; it doesn't leave you enough room to steal.**

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## *Lesson 18: All Art Is Identity Art!*

This is because it is made by *somebody*.

And don't worry about being "political" enough: Kazimir Malevich painted squares during World War I; Mark Rothko made fuzzy squares during World War II; Agnes Martin drew grids on canvas during the Vietnam War. All art is a confession, more or less oblique.

Artists who claim that art is supposed to be good for us need also to see that there are as many ways of art being "good for us" as there are works of art.

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## *Lesson 19: All Art Was Once Contemporary Art*

Never forget this, that all art was made by artists for and in reaction to their time. It will make you less cynical and closed off and more understanding and open to everything you ever see. **Please do this!** It applies to all of us.

# ***Step Four: Enter the Art World***

*A guide to the snake pit.*

## ***Lesson 20: Accept That You Will Likely Be Poor***

Even though all we see of the art world these days are astronomical prices, glitz, glamour, and junkie-like behavior, remember that only one percent of one percent of one percent of all artists become rich off their artwork. You may feel overlooked, underrecognized, and underpaid. Too bad. Stop feeling sorry for yourself; that's not why you're doing this.

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## ***Lesson 21: Define Success***

But be careful. Typical answers are money, happiness, freedom, “doing what I want,” having a community of artists, having people see what I do.

But ... if you marry a rich person and have lots of money, would you be satisfied with just the money? Also, Subway sells a lot of sandwiches, but that doesn't make them good.

**What about being “happy”? Don't be silly!** A lot of successful people are unhappy.

And a lot of happy people aren't successful. I'm “successful,” and I'm confused, terrified, insecure, and foul all the time. Success and happiness live on different sides of the tracks. Do you want the real definition of success?

The best definition of success is time — the time to do your work.

How will you make time if you don't have money? You will work full time for a long time.

You will be depressed because of this for a long time — resentful, frustrated, envious.

I'm sorry, that's the way it is.

But you're a sneaky, resourceful artist! Soon you figure out a way to work only four days a week; you start to be a little less depressed. But then on Sunday night, you're depressed again, back on your ride-to-nowhere job that's still taking up too much of your time.

But you are really sneaky and resourceful; this is a life-and-death matter to you. Eventually—and this comes for fully 80 percent of the artists I have ever known — **you scam a way to work an only-three-days-a-week job.** You may work in a gallery; for an artist or a museum; as a teacher, an art critic, an art handler, a bookkeeper, a proofreader, whatever.

**Now you aren't depressed anymore:** You have time to make your work and hang out more; you are now the first measure of successful. Now get to work. Or quit being an artist.

## *Lesson 22: It Takes Only a Few People to Make a Career*

Exactly how many? Let's count.

**Dealers?** You need only one dealer — someone who believes in you, supports you emotionally, pays you promptly, doesn't play too many mind games; who'll be honest with you about your crappy or great art, who does as much as possible to spread your work out there and try to make money from it, too. This dealer doesn't have to be in New York.

**Collectors?** You need only five or six collectors who will buy your work from time to time and over the years, who really get what you're up to, who are willing to go through the ups and downs, who don't say, "Make them like *this*." Each of these six collectors might talk to six other collectors about your work. Even if you have only six collectors, that's enough for you to make enough money to have enough time to make your work.

**Critics?** It would be nice to have two or as many as three critics who seem to get what you're doing. It would be best if these critics were of your generation, not geezers like me.

**Curators?** It would be nice to have one or two curators of your generation or a little older who would put you in shows from time to time.

That's it! Twelve people. **Surely your crappy art can fake out 12 stupid people!**  
I've seen it done with only three or four supporters. I've seen it done with one!

In 1957, gallery owner Leo Castelli discovered Jasper Johns while visiting Robert Rauschenberg's studio. Castelli immediately offered Johns his first solo show. It was there that Alfred Barr, the founding director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, purchased three works. Additional works were bought by Philip Johnson and Burton and Emily Hall Tremain. Before the show even went up, executive editor Thomas Hess put a Johns on the cover of *ARTnews*.

In 1993, Elizabeth Peyton's New York breakthrough was staged by dealer Gavin Brown in Room 828 of the Chelsea Hotel. Visitors asked for the key to the room at the front desk. They went upstairs, unlocked the door, and entered a small studio apartment facing 23rd Street. There they saw 21 small-to-medium-size black-and-white charcoal-and-ink drawings of dandies, Napoleon, Queen Elizabeth II, Ludwig II, and others. Any of the works could have been stolen; none were. Since then, Peyton has had museum shows all over the world; her works sell for close to a million dollars. According to the hotel ledger, only 38 people saw the show after the opening. It doesn't take much.

I can't sugarcoat this next part: Some people are better connected than others. They get to 12 faster. The art world is full of these privileged people. You can hate them. I do. It is unfair and unjust and still in operation around women and artists of color especially, not to mention artists over 40. This needs to change and be changed. By all of us.



## Lesson 23: Learn to Write

When it comes to artist statements, Keep it simple, stupid.

Don't use art jargon; write in your own voice, write how you talk. Don't try to write smart. Keep your statement direct, clear, to the point. Don't oppose big concepts like "nature" and "culture." Don't use words like *interrogate*, *reconceptualize*, *deconstruct*, *symbolize*, *transcendental*, *mystical*, *commodity culture*, *liminal space*, or *haptic*. Don't quote Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida. Those guys are great. But don't quote them. Come up with your own theory. People who claim to hate or have no theory: That's your theory, you idiots!

Important things are hard to write about. That's the way it is. Deal with it. And if it's pretentious to say, don't say it.

### Exercise: Artist's Statement

Write a simple 100-to-150-word statement about your work; give it to someone who doesn't know your work. Have them tell you what they think your work looks like. Note the differences.

#### *Two Tips:*

- (A) Don't make writing a big deal. Just write, you big baby! You already know how to write.
- (B) Never just say, "You tell me what it is." That's pompous bullshit.
- (C) When it comes to your work, you're the best authority there is.

## Step Five: Survive the Art World

*Psychic strategies for dealing with the ugliness (in tide and out).* (Portrait), by Florine Stetimer, 1915.



uiat and Francesco Clemente, 1986. Photo: Patrick McMullan/Getty Images

### Lesson 24: Artists Must Be Vampires

Stay up late every night with other artists around your age. **Show up.** Go to openings, events, parties, wherever there are more than two of your kind.

Artists must commune with their own kind all the time. There are no exceptions to this rule, even if you live “out in the woods.” Preferably commune in person, but online is more than fine. It doesn’t matter where you live: big city, small city, little town. You will fight and love together; you will develop new languages together and give each other comfort, conversation, and the strength to carry on. This is how you will change the world — and your art.

To protect yourselves, **form small gangs.** Protect one another no matter what; this gang will allow all of you to go out into and take over parts of the world. Argue, sleep with, love, hate, get sick of your fellow gang members. Whatever happens, you need one another — for now. Protect the weakest artist in your gang, because **there are people in the gang who think you’re the weak one.**

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## Lesson 25: Learn to Deal With Rejection

Manet: Inconceivably vulgar?

In 1956, “after careful consideration,” the Museum of Modern Art rejected a shoe drawing by Warhol that he had given to the museum. Monet was rejected for years from the Paris Salon exhibitions.

**The work of Manet and Courbet was rejected as scandalous, sensationalist, ugly.**

Manet’s paintings were said to exhibit “inconceivable vulgarity.”

Manet didn’t want to show with Cézanne because he thought *he* was vulgar.



Manet: Inconceivably vulgar

**Stephen King’s most renowned and first book, *Carrie*, was rejected 30 times.** King threw the first pages of the book out. His wife went through the trash, rescued them, and persuaded him to keep writing.

**The Beatles were rejected** by Decca Records, which believed “guitar groups are on the way out,” and “the Beatles have no future in show business.”

But don’t just ignore criticism. Instead, keep your rejection letters; paste them to your wall. They are goads, things to prove wrong. **You may be Ahab about these bad reviews, but don’t get taken down by them; they don’t define you.**

Much trickier: Accept that every criticism can have a grain of truth to it, something you did that allowed this person to say what was said. You might be ahead of your time, but the person couldn’t see it. Or maybe you’re doing something that isn’t up to snuff, that allowed them not to appreciate your work, or you haven’t found a way to make your work speak to the people you want it to speak to. That’s all on you.

In general, you must be open to critique but also develop an elephant skin. And remember that nothing anyone says to you about your work can be worse than the things you’ve already thought and said to yourself 100 times.

**I always tell anyone criticizing me, “You could be right.”**

It has a nice double edge that the person often never feels and that gives pleasure.



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## *Lesson 26: Make an Enemy of Envy*

*Today!*

Envy looks at others but blinds you.

It will eat you alive as an artist; you live in the service of it, always on the edge of a funk, dwelling on past slights, watching everything, always seeing what other people have, scanning for other artists who are mentioned instead of you. Envy erodes your inner mind, leaves less room for development and, most important, for honest self-criticism. Your imagination is taken up by what others have, rather than what you need to be doing in your own work to get what you want. From this fortress, everything that doesn't happen to you is blamed on something or someone else. You fancy yourself a modern van Gogh, a passed-over genius the world isn't ready for. You relinquish agency and responsibility.

Your feelings of lack define you, make you sour, bitter, not loving, and mean. **Poor you.**

Too bad that all those other "bad artists" are getting shows and you're not.

Too bad they're getting the articles, money, and love! Too bad they have a trust fund, went to better schools, married someone rich, are better looking, have thinner ankles, are more social, have better connections, or use their connections, networking skills, and education.

**Too bad you're shy.**

A secret: Almost everyone in the art world is almost equally as bashful and skittish about putting themselves out there. I'm unable to attend seated dinners. We all do the best we can. But "poor me" isn't a way to make your work better, and you're out of the game if you don't show up. **So grow a pair of whatever and get back to work!**

## Lesson 27: Having a Family Is Fine



Picasso: family man.  
Photo: © Edward  
Quinn/© Edward  
Quinn

There is an unwritten rule — especially for women in the art world — that having children is “bad for your career.” This is idiotic.

Probably 90 percent of all artists have had children. These artists have mostly been men, and it wasn’t bad for their careers. Of course, women were tasked almost exclusively with domesticity and child-rearing over the centuries, not permitted in schools and academies, not even allowed to draw the nude, let alone apprentice to or learn from artists.

That is over.

Having children is not “bad” for your career. Having children means having less time or money or space. So what? Most children raised within the art world have amazing lives.

As artist Laurel Nakadate has observed, **being a parent is already very much like being an artist.** It means always lugging things around, living in chaos, doing things that are mysterious or impossible or scary. As with art, children can drive you crazy all day, make you wish all this could go away. Then in a single second, at any point, you are redeemed with a moment of intense, transformative love.

# ***Step Six: Attain Galactic Brain***

*Jerry's cosmic epigrams.*

## ***Lesson 28: What You Don't Like Is As Important As What You Do Like***

Don't say, "I hate figurative painting." You never know when you will see a so-called figurative painting that catches your attention. So don't be an art-world undertaker pronouncing mediums dead! "Painting is dead," "The novel is dead," "The author is dead," "Photography is dead," "History is dead." **Nothing is dead!**

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## ***Lesson 29: Art Is a Form of Knowing Yourself***

Art is not optional, not decorative landscaping in front of the castle of civilization. It is no more or less important than philosophy, religion, economics, or psychology.

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## ***Lesson 30: "Artists do not own the meaning of their work." — Roberta Smith***

Remember: anyone may use your art — any art — in any way that works for them. You may say your work is about diaspora, but others might see in it climate change or a nature study. **Cool.**

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## ***Lesson 31: All Art Is Subjective***

What does this mean? We have consensus that certain artists are good, but you may look at a Rembrandt and find yourself thinking ... *It's pretty brown.* That's fine! It doesn't mean you're dumb.

It does mean that while there is one text for *Hamlet*, every person who sees the play sees a different *Hamlet*. Moreover, every time *you* see *Hamlet*, it is different. This is the case with almost all good art. It is always changing, and every time you see it anew, you think:

*How could I have missed that before? Now I finally see!*

Until the next time it rearranges your thinking.

This brings you into one of art's metaphysical quasar chambers:

Art is a static, non-changing thing that is never the same.



## Lesson 32: You Must Prize Vulnerability

*Radical vulnerability.*



Jeff Koons's whole career turned on an epic humiliation: painting himself and his porn-star wife in flagrante. Photo: Michael Nagle/The New York Times/Redux

What's that? It's following your work into its darkest corners and strangest manifestations, revealing things about yourself that you don't want to reveal until your work requires you to do this, and never failing in only mediocre or generic ways. We all contradict ourselves. We contain multitudes. You must be willing to fail flamboyantly, do things that seem silly and that might get you judged as a bad person.

Can you?

## *Lesson 33: Be Delusional*

At three a.m., demons speak to all of us. I am old, and they still speak to me every night. And every day.

They tell you you're not good enough, didn't go to the right schools, are stupid, don't know how to draw, don't have enough money, aren't original; that what you do doesn't matter, and who cares, and you don't even know art history, and can't schmooze, and have a bad neck. They tell you that you're faking it, that other people see through you, that you're lazy, that you don't know what you're doing, and that you're just doing this to get attention or money.

I have one solution to turn away these demons: After beating yourself up for half an hour or so, stop and say out loud, "Yeah, but I'm a fucking genius."

You are, now. Art is for anyone, it just isn't for everyone. These rules are your tools.

Now use them to go change the world. ***Get to work!***

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